



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

WHAT USCIRF IS

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The broad-based coalition that advocated strongly for IRFA's enactment sought to elevate the fundamental human right of religious freedom as a central component of U.S. foreign policy. By statute, USCIRF monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad—not in the United States—using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and Congressional leaders of both political parties. A professional, non-partisan staff supports USCIRF's work. While USCIRF is separate from the State Department, the Department's Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom is a non-voting ex officio Commissioner.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ABROAD

Religious freedom is an important human right recognized in international law and treaties. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." The freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought and conscience, and is intertwined with the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. The promotion of this freedom is a necessary component of U.S. foreign policy.

WHAT USCIRF DOES

- **Issues an Annual Report** by May 1st of each year. The report assesses the U.S. government's implementation of IRFA; recommends countries that the Secretary of State should designate as "Countries of Particular Concern" for engaging in or tolerating "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom;" documents country conditions in about 30 countries; reports on significant trends; and makes recommendations for U.S. policy. Unlike the State

Department's separate and distinct international religious freedom report, USCIRF's Annual Report includes specific policy recommendations.

- **Engages Congress** by working with Congressional offices, advising on legislation, testifying at hearings, and holding briefings on religious freedom issues. For example, USCIRF has engaged Congress on issues such as: protecting international religious freedom; the danger of anti-blasphemy laws; genocide; refugees, religious freedom abuses in China, Egypt, Iran, Syria, Vietnam, and other countries; anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim bias in Europe; and the plight of prisoners of conscience around the world.
- **Engages the Executive Branch:** USCIRF regularly meets with Executive Branch officials, including at the Departments of State and Homeland Security, to share information, highlight situations of concern, and discuss USCIRF's recommendations for U.S. policy.
- **Documents Religious Freedom Conditions Abroad** by meeting with senior government officials, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, religious leaders, victims of persecution, and other stakeholders promoting religious freedom. Countries visited include: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Burma, Central African Republic, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.
- **Issues Reports with Recommendations, Press Releases, Op-Eds, and Journal Articles** on topics including: the global use of blasphemy laws; Putin imperiling religious freedom in Russia; religious prisoners of conscience; global religious freedom helping support women's rights; sectarian violence; religious freedom abuses in Burma; anti-Semitism; and the U.S. government's treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal.
- **Engages Multilaterally** in meetings related to religious freedom and tolerance, including at the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the European Union, and with the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom for Religion or Belief (IPP-FoRB).